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Author(s): Lambkin, Magdalen

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esharp@gla.ac.uk

Can Scriptures Unite? A theological exploration of the interreligious practice of Scriptural Reasoning

Magdalen Lambkin (University of Glasgow)

Introduction

In an age when the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are often viewed as sources of oppression and interreligious conflict, Scriptural Reasoning (SR) is a practice which celebrates those scriptures and their traditions of interpretation together as ‘sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world’ (Kepnes 2006, p.24). SR consists in shared scriptural study among Jews, Christians and Muslims, who come together in small groups to read and discuss extracts of their sacred texts. Rather than avoiding difficult passages, Scriptural Reasoners acknowledge the negative potential of the scriptures and seek to build the trust necessary to tackle divisive texts, as well as those which speak to common concerns, together. SR is therefore concerned with ‘the establishment and deepening of relations between persons with respect to texts’ (Adams 2006a, p.50). Given the great need for inter-religious understanding in today’s interconnected world, such a practice is potentially of enormous value. SR seeks to have a public impact through dialogue on the ethical and political implications of their scriptures (Ford 2006, p.19). It has had some success in this regard, winning favour in many circles — from international meetings of

renowned academics and world religious leaders to groups of students and non-academic religious practitioners as well as peace groups.¹

This paper will examine some of the philosophical presuppositions and theological implications of SR, to consider whether the practice, with such worthy goals, is cognitively sound. Attention is drawn to the postliberal foundations of SR and their appropriateness is questioned, especially in light of the fact that postliberalism is a largely Protestant Christian concern, and therefore cannot provide a context for dialogue which is equally hospitable to all participants. Further tensions and theological grey areas will also be investigated which relate to certain claims made about the practice. First, that it involves, in Kepnes's words, the 'preservation' of the 'separate communities' of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (2006, p.24) which are presented with remarkable disregard for the internal diversity and historical fluidity of these traditions. Second, that SR constitutes truth-seeking and open-ended dialogue which has often resulted in the recognition of the three scriptures as 'sources' of 'divine spirit' (Kepnes, p.24). The incompatibility of these assertions will be demonstrated and examined in light of three 'facts' about the religious traditions concerned which do not receive adequate attention from Scriptural Reasoners. These are: the opposition within Christianity and Islam to shared scriptural study; the mutual influence and interaction between the traditions throughout their collective history; and the comparable universal claims which these religions traditionally affirm. It will be argued that the practice of SR cannot effectively insulate the traditions from the process of development and transformation which has always been the result of new learning, nor should it attempt to do so.

¹ See The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/who.html>, (28/05/10).

SR was initially developed collaboratively through trial and error but there is now a good deal of theoretical instruction, evident in the various attempts to create ‘rules’ (Ochs 2002), ‘maxims’ (Ford 2006) and a ‘handbook’ (Kepnes 2006) for SR. This paper will limit itself to ‘after-the-event’ theoretical reflections on the practice, particularly those of Christian scholars David Ford and Nicholas Adams, and Jewish scholar Stephen Kepnes whose articles in the edited volume *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (2006) offer more or less generalised rationales and methodologies for SR.

The roots of Scriptural Reasoning

According to Ford, SR brings together four key strands; Jewish Textual Reasoning; Christian postliberal text interpretation; a range of less text-centred Christian philosophies and theologies, both Catholic and Protestant; and Muslim concern simultaneously for the Qur’an and for Islam in relation to Western modernity (2006, p.4). However, Ford only elaborates on the postliberal and Textual Reasoning strands, implying the lesser importance of Muslim and Catholic elements for the general practice of SR. The practice was developed in the 1990s by Christian scholars Ford and Daniel Hardy and Jewish scholar Peter Ochs. They had together experienced Jewish Textual Reasoning meetings, which involve the gathering of Jewish text scholars, philosophers and theologians in small groups to explore the multiple possible meanings of a given text for contemporary life. The Textual Reasoning group concluded that Jews would benefit from deeper engagement with Christians and Muslims (2006, p.3) and some had also found congenial the postliberal hermeneutics of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, elements which Ford identifies as ‘the seeds of later Abrahamic developments’ (2006, p.4). Muslims were subsequently

invited to join the dialogue, the foundations of which had already been laid.

Ford contends that it is in the scriptures that we find what is most distinctive in the traditions and so by bringing practitioners together with their ‘most treasured’ texts, SR has the capacity to ‘sustain’ the ‘core identities’ of the three faiths concerned in ‘collegial conversation’ (2006, p.2). Similarly Kepnes states that SR seeks to ‘articulate and preserve the separate identities of each of the three religions’ (2006, p.28). This language of preservation stands in deliberate contrast with that of prominent figures in interfaith dialogue such as John Hick and Hans Küng who insist that traditional theologies must be transformed in the face of interreligious encounter. Ben Quash claims SR as a ‘new paradigm of interfaith encounter’ against ‘liberal’ modes of interfaith dialogue which search for commonalities in either the ethical or metaphysical realms (2006, p.74). These modes are seen as distorting and diluting the distinctive elements of each faith involved as they attempt to force diverse religions into an artificial meta-framework (Kepnes 2006, p.29). Kepnes claims that SR dispenses with meta-narratives and instead places the three distinct scriptures at the centre of the dialogue, so that a ‘new/old philosophical idiom that is better attuned to religious particularity’ can be found which will lead to a ‘richer, more complex and sensitive inter-faith dialogue’ (2006, p.29). Along postliberal lines, Jewish and Christian Scriptural Reasoners reject the notion that religions share a common core (Quash 2006, p.74). However, this ‘liberal’ perspective on religions in fact fits more closely with the Islamic view, which regards Christianity, Judaism and Islam all as emerging from the same core message sent by God to each of the prophets. Furthermore, the tendency amongst Jewish and Christian Scriptural Reasoners is to simply replace this ‘liberal’ metaframework

with a post liberal one which, as will be seen, does not accurately reflect the nature of the religious traditions concerned.

Due to this deep suspicion of transformation, SR resonates with conservative thinkers (Winter 2006, p.109). Consensus is not sought, and participants are encouraged not to be ‘afraid of *argument*, as one intellectually honest way of responding to differences’ (Ford 2006, p.5). This mixture of honesty and courtesy, where the identities of each faith are upheld in all their particularity, provides, Ford suggests, an environment where deep friendships can be formed — ‘the most tangible anticipation of future peace’ (2006, p.6). Yet this also carries with it a great deal of ambiguity, involving:

the willingness, on the one hand, to enter into dispute for the sake of God’s truth and love, and, on the other hand, to recognise the strength of our bonds in the family of Abraham and the call to live patiently with our deep differences. (2005, p.13)

One might gauge that SR is merely about the passionate exchange of beliefs coupled with the tolerant recognition that the other is not likely to change their mind. Yet Scriptural Reasoners claim that their practice of engagement across differences is not primarily informative, but *generative* (Adams 2006, p.47), suggesting some level of appreciation for the others’ otherness. Indeed, Ford sees SR as a theological endeavour; a ‘truth-seeking’ conversation which will move ‘wherever that might lead’ (2005 p.12). It is said that outcomes are not predetermined, a key feature of the practice being its ‘openness to surprise’ (Adams 2006a, p.49; cf. Quash 2006, p.61–62). One surprise of the process has been the experience of a certain spiritual dimension or ‘semi-liturgical’ quality to meetings (Ford 2006, p.7). However, the practice is carefully distinguished from the belief and practice of each of the traditions

involved. A structural metaphor of ‘house’, ‘campus’ and ‘tent’, developed by Ford, is employed as a means to delineate the ‘space’ where the practice can take place. Participants are described as both deeply committed ‘representatives’ (Kepnes 2006, p.26) of ‘houses’ of worship (churches, mosques, synagogues), and academic institutions. Ford presents SR as an infrequent ‘leisure’ activity, which is ‘non-focal’ within one’s own scriptural study (2006, p.12–13) and is practiced in the ‘tent of meeting’ on the periphery of ‘house’ and ‘campus’ (2006, p.7–13).

In another metaphor which contrasts with that of the fixed borders of house, campus and tent, Ford writes of the scriptures’ ‘oceans of meaning’ within which the participants dive ‘in search of the pearl of a deep sense that rings true now’ (2006, p.15). It is not at all clear how this image, which could imply fluidity between traditions, relates to Ford’s dominant structural metaphor.² Such mixed use of metaphor is not uncommon in academic writing, but in this case the lack of metaphoric coherence seems indicative of a substantial theological incoherence. The barriers between religious traditions are stressed and the significance of the discovery of ‘deep sense’ and ‘truth’ in another religious tradition for those very barriers goes unacknowledged. In order to shed further light on the tensions within the practice as it has been described so far, we will now move on to consider three ‘facts’ about the religious traditions concerned which receive little attention in the literature of SR.

1. The traditions oppose such a practice

Ford admits that ‘it is not part of any of the traditions to engage in joint study of their scriptures with the others’, and therefore the practice of SR is a ‘novel’ one (2006, p.7). But Scriptural Reasoners

² I am grateful to Brian Lambkin for his insights regarding Ford’s use of metaphor.

seem reticent to deal directly with the fact that their traditions in fact *discourage* such an activity. Jewish scholar Steven Kepnes, for example, refers to the ‘mutual respect for scripture in the three Monotheistic traditions’ (2006, p.25). True, each tradition holds a special respect for scripture, but it cannot be accurately said that this respect is *mutual*. Rather, the traditions have each prized their own scripture as sacred and regarded the others as either false or deficient and requiring the interpretation of their tradition. To the extent that Christianity and Islam have recognised the scriptures of other religions they have claimed that only they can interpret them correctly.

As one Scriptural Reasoner has noted, Jews and Christians are ‘two peoples separated by a common text’ (Harvey, 2001). Christians embraced the Hebrew Scriptures as divine revelation, but they incorporated them into their canon as ‘Old Testament’ – that is as partial and in need of the fulfilment provided by the New Testament affirmations of Jesus as the Christ. For the majority of Christian history, Christians judged the continued Jewish commitment to the Hebrew Scriptures and ‘stubborn’ rejection of their fulfilment in Christ as an absurdity. They had, it was believed, forfeited their special covenantal relationship with God along with any authority they had to interpret their sacred texts. Christianity’s relationship with the Hebrew Scriptures for centuries therefore went hand in hand with the dislocation of the Jews. Thankfully, Christian churches to a large extent have repented of the anti-semitism that was fuelled by this theological judgement of the Jews. However supersessionist readings of scripture go right to the heart of Christian identity in the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfilment of Jewish hopes, and so are much trickier to expunge (see Ruether 1974). This is apparent when we consider a contribution made by Ford to a SR meeting where he sought to offer a

‘reading of Ephesians that not only resists Christian hostility to Jews but even allows the communities today to be of mutual blessing’ (Ford 2001). He did this in part by drawing on a typological proposal by Lindbeck that contends that ‘both the church and Israel should be regarded as types, not of Christ, but of “the people of God in fellowship with God at the end of time,”’ (Ford 2001). A fellow Christian theologian however, felt Ford was in danger of ‘blurring [...] very significant differences’ by asking him to ‘give up’ his ‘Christological convictions about the [eschatological] end for the sake of dialogue’ (Fowl 2001). Their disagreement highlights the need for systematic revision if scriptures are to be read in a way that recognises religious communities as a ‘mutual blessing’. Kepnes has expressed a wish that Scriptural Reasoners ‘address the difficult “content issues” of the Christian hermeneutics of prefiguration and supersessionism’ (2001). To achieve this, however, pragmatic interpretations of scripture, such as those provided by Ford, will not suffice. If it is true that Christian supersessionism is central to traditional Christian identities then it will never be satisfactorily addressed so long as Scriptural Reasoners insist that their identities remain untouched.

Furthermore, in the theoretical reflections on SR there does not appear to be adequate care given to the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures have been a source of bitter dispute between Jews and Christians. For example, Kepnes indicates without any hint of problematic that just as the Muslim and the Christian have priority in interpreting the Qur’an and New Testament respectively, the Jew has an ‘authority over’ the Torah ‘as its lover and teacher’ that the others do not possess (Kepnes 2006, p.27). However, it is by no means self evident that Jews should be given a greater authority in the interpretation of texts which Christians and Jews share. One could argue that Kepnes is here denying

a core element of Christian identity by implying that Christians have less right to elucidate the Hebrew Scriptures than their Jewish colleagues. Scriptural Reasoners often make reference to the common heritage of the 'Abrahamic' traditions, nevertheless they have at times, as in the above example, reflected on their practice in a manner which suggests there are three completely separate traditions and scriptures involved. Clearly however, there is a complex interrelation at play. The most problematic relation in terms of discouraging the practice of 'truth-seeking' interscriptural reading is that of the Christian views toward the Qur'an, as the very existence of this later scripture calls into question the ongoing validity of the Christian tradition. As Martin Bauschke has shown, historically Christianity's main response to the Qur'an was to view it as 'a book full of lies, blasphemies and pseudo revelations' (2007, p.138). In order to accept the Qur'an, as Bauschke does, as 'an authentic word of God', the recognition of the prophethood of Muhammad is required which in turn necessitates considerable revision of traditional Christologies (2007, p.150-152).

As a later scripture, the Qur'an is by contrast able to attribute some limited value to the Jewish and Christian texts. The Qur'an claims to confirm and protect (Q 5:48) the 'Torah' (*Tawrat*) and 'Gospel' (*Injil*) and indeed, Muslims are instructed to 'believe in' them (Q 4:136), perhaps suggesting a clear warrant for a practice such as SR. Historically however, Muslims by and large have not engaged with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. This is because the Qur'an, by way of explanation as to why the Jews and Christians rejected the prophethood of Muhammad, declares that the Christian and Jewish Scriptures have been corrupted (Q 3:24; 2:79). They are therefore in need of the correction of the Qur'an (Q 5:15) — God's complete (Q 85:21-22), incorruptible (Q 41:42) and final (Q 33:40) revelation. Muslims have

consequently often regarded Christians and Jews as guilty of the wilful distortion of God's word and their Scriptures as abrogated (Aasi 1999, p.xv). This fact is conspicuously absent from Muslim scholar Tim Winter's reflections on SR, who refers to the Qur'an's call on Jews and Christians to uphold their scriptures (2006, p.111), but neglects references to their corruption and abrogation.

Ford rightly says that the practice of SR must be warranted by each member from within their traditions and there is no expectation that there should be agreement regarding its theological rationale (2006, p.7). However there is little evidence amongst theoretical reflections on SR of an effort to ensure that this new practice and the theologies espoused by Scriptural Reasoners are indeed consistent with one another. Perhaps Scriptural Reasoners are reluctant to include these inner theological discussions in the broader, public SR discourse. Inevitably the issue of what status is to be accorded to the other scriptures and traditions would be raised, which may well compromise the 'reverential attitude towards the scriptures' which the meetings require (Kepnes 2006, p.37). If it is clear, for example, that a Christian Scriptural Reasoner assumes the Qur'an to be a forgery drawn from Christian and Jewish sources, her dialogue partners may well consider it disingenuous for her to engage with the text in a setting which is in some sense 'ritual and liturgical' (Kepnes 2006, p.37). Moreover, it is not only the feelings of the dialogue partners that are at stake here, but the integrity of the practice. To seek to engage seriously with a text claimed to contain revealed truth together with its adherents without evaluating those claims to truth — and one's own tradition's rejection of them — is to fall short of a coherent theological approach.

Prior to the question of what status is accorded to the texts of other traditions, is the question of whether Scriptural Reasoners

recognise their dialogue partners as worshipping the one true God. As has been mentioned, while SR recognises certain commonalities between the traditions, it does not wish to *base* itself on any ‘common ground.’ Hardy has refuted the perception of SR that members must come to the table with a prior acknowledgement that they all worship the same God (2006, p.186). Indeed, religious practitioners are welcome to enter the dialogue with the express intention of converting the others involved (Ochs 2007). What participants have found through continued interaction, however, is that attempts to convert inevitably fail. ‘No one wins’, says Ochs, ‘because the other text and its proponent can answer questions’ (2007). This view is affirmed by Adams who recommends that Scriptural Reasoners acknowledge that their truth-claims are not self-evident. The status of the other’s metaphysics should be regarded as a ‘basic assumption’, ‘fundamental narrative’, or a ‘hypothesis’ that is open to testing for coherence, comprehensiveness and in terms of what kinds of practices it elicits (2006a, p.45). What then follows if one finds that the other scores highly in terms of coherence, comprehensiveness and practice? Adams does not say. There is no hint of the need to evaluate the truth claims of the other in light of the truth claims of one’s own tradition, and yet this is surely what ‘truth-seeking’ would require. Without offering any theological reflection Adams states that:

the recognition that each worships the one true God moves scriptural reasoning beyond an interaction determined by conventions for showing strangers hospitality [...] There is an “other” to the three traditions, and that seems in an obscure way to make friendships possible. (2006b)

The presence of this divine ‘other’ is deeply felt by many during SR meetings. This experiential aspect has been central to the success of the practice and yet no Scriptural Reasoner seems willing to evaluate its

impact and meaning. According to Hardy, there is an ‘understandable reticence’ in declaring that Scriptural Reasoners often feel themselves in meetings to be ‘visited by the Divine’ (2006, p.187). For some the ‘liturgical’ quality of meetings consists not merely in adopting a ‘reverential attitude’ (Kepnes 2006, p.37) but in the experience that by engaging with scriptures across religious boundaries, divine truths can be revealed.

In the spontaneous moment of insight into and across scriptures, participants are overtaken by the movement of the spirit that many recognize as a disclosure of truth. (Kepnes 2006, p.30)

It is not clear just what Kepnes means by ‘truth’ here, or whether his understanding is shared by other Scriptural Reasoners. Indeed this is unlikely given the differing ways in which Scripture and Revelation are conceived of in the various traditions, another feature of the traditions to which Scriptural Reasoners do not pay adequate attention. Nevertheless it may be inferred that a ‘disclosure of truth’ which occurs through engaging with the religious other as they relate to their scripture indicates some level of validity in the other’s faith and scripture. This appears to be affirmed when Kepnes confidently states that:

SR regards these books not only as texts but as scripture and this means that they are *regarded as living sources of divine interaction* with humanity. SR members *believe* that the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain central vehicles through which the presence of God is known and experienced. (Kepnes 2006, p.26) (Emphasis added)

This view is not necessarily problematic from a Jewish perspective (see Coward 1988, p.33) but it does diverge considerably from traditional Christian and Muslim perspectives, not to mention the claim of SR to dispense with metanarratives. As has been suggested, it would require considerable theological negotiation around the Qur'anic charge of *tahrif* to affirm that Christianity and Judaism *remain* central vehicles through which the presence of God is known and experienced. In contrast to Kepnes's reflection, Muslim Scriptural Reasoner Aref Ali Nayed has called for a shared hermeneutical method for the practice which 'respects the sacred *origin* and nature of scripture' (Nayed 2005. Emphasis added). Yet, as been said, this could not be endorsed by Christians in relation to the Qur'an without major theological revision. Accordingly, it is difficult to see how conservative Christians could adhere to Hardy's sentiment that the scriptures encountered 'embody the elemental speech by-and of -God', even with the acknowledgment that 'this does not imply that all of the Scriptures have equal standing as such' (Hardy 2006, p.185). It must be questioned in what sense can the Christian affirm the Qur'an as being 'from God', when the text itself explicitly rejects what Christians believe to be the essence of revelation — the divinity of Christ.

How can it be explained that radical statements regarding the recognition of sacredness in other religious traditions are made without theological support? For Adams this recognition entails 'a "religious" disassociation of sacredness and authority':

members of tradition A read texts that are authoritative for members of tradition B in a way that acknowledges the sacredness of the text without necessarily acknowledging its authority for members of tradition A. (2006b, p.243)

Adams does not explain the basis for this disassociation and in fact he admits that ‘it is hard to know what Scriptural Reasoners make of this approach to sacredness’ (2006b, p.244). Although it is not explicitly stated, Adams’s rationale seems to lie in the postliberal presuppositions held by many Scriptural Reasoners which emphasise religious traditions as internally coherent, separate systems which do not impact on one another.

2. Religions are not discrete entities

According to Kepnes:

SR assumes that the individual traditions constitute, in George Lindbeck’s terms, unique “cultural-linguistic” religious systems that maintain internal principles and mechanisms of coherence. (Kepnes 2006, p.28–29)

In Lindbeck’s view traditions are self-contained, self-sufficient ‘idioms for construing reality’ where the ability to make meaningful (i.e. either true or false) statements rests in the ‘adequacy of their categories’ (1984, p.47–48). The differences between religions may be analogous to the ‘mathematical and the non-mathematical’ and hence be incommensurable (1984, p.48). Religious experience cannot be differentiated from the idiom in which it is conceived and so religions may produce ‘fundamentally divergent depth experiences of what it is to be human’(1984, p.41). Lindbeck summarises:

The cultural-linguistic approach is open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and therefore also of what it would mean for something to be most important (i.e., “God”). (1984, p.55)

One might well ask how an interreligious dialogue practice could identify itself with such a perspective, which tends towards the view

that the teachings of one religion are unintelligible or irrelevant to members of another. Lindbeck does in fact seek to provide a rationale for interreligious dialogue but given his insistence that religious teachings only make sense within their particular cultural-linguistic framework, his model does not allow for mutual enrichment between traditions. Yet Scriptural Reasoners have experienced and celebrated the generative aspect of interreligious dialogue and they do not adopt an extreme view of the incommensurability of religious traditions, at least in relation to the monotheistic traditions concerned. Adams states rather that ‘because understanding between members of different cultures actually happens, there must be something that grounds this understanding’ (2006a, p.43). He explains further:

Scriptural reasoning [...] makes no attempt to prejudge the actual points of coincidence and divergence between the different traditions. Instead it remains content with the fact that understanding is possible, and submits to the luck of the moment. (Adams 2006a, p.57)

However Adams has a very circumscribed understanding about what might be possible within the ‘luck of the moment’, a view which seems to be determined by a post liberal understanding of the separateness of the traditions. He claims that ‘participants engage in SR only as members of a particular tradition [and] only speak from out of this tradition’ (Adams 2006b, p.244) as though the continued practice of SR has no impact on the religious imagination of those involved. Such a standpoint is surely unrealistic, and is certainly not reflected in the experience of Muslim Scriptural Reasoner Aref Ali Nayed, who recognises multiple inputs to his reading of the Qur’an, including those from outside the Muslim tradition (Nayed 2005). For many however, the integration of sources external to one’s tradition is presumably too closely associated with ‘syncretism’, often viewed as involving the

corruption of truth, superficiality and inconsistency in belief and practice, and the loss of identity (Schmidt-Leukel 2009, p.67-89). Scriptural Reasoners appear to fall back on a cultural-linguistic system as a means of protecting themselves against these perceived dangers. If religions are speaking different languages and perhaps even talking about different things, then they are not to be considered in competition with one another as the claims of each pertain only to their particular framework.

However, this postliberal affirmation of particularity has a number of theoretical and empirical problems which have been summarised by Paul Hedges, only two of which will be rehearsed here for reasons of space. First, Hedges calls on the findings of modern anthropology which deny the viability of ‘isolated societies’ and point to ‘a number of recurrent themes and concepts [that] can be found in very different cultural environments’ to assert the ‘reality of cross-faith interpenetration’ (2008, p.123). Second, as Hedges argues, ‘otherness’ is not a virtue in itself (Hedges 2008, p.127; c.f. Schmidt-Luekel 2009, p.31). This is a basic point and yet one which is not evident in, for example, Adams’s statement that ‘In a context which values friendship, disagreement is a gift to be treasured’ (2006a, p.54). For those whose priority is truth-seeking disagreement may indeed be a gift, but its value lies in the creative thought which wrestling with the issues at stake elicits. If points of disagreement are merely admired for their interest and carefully stored away, we are in danger of reducing religious difference to aesthetics and losing sight of the truth-seeking enterprise of theology. Hedges points to Terry Eagleton’s critique that distinguishing ourselves from the other is one way of ignoring criticism. To the extent that it does this SR is losing out on one of the major benefits of interreligious dialogue — its’ potential to function as a mutually

corrective mechanism. Indeed it seems disingenuous to celebrate that another person holds a position about that which is most important, i.e. ‘God’, that you hold to be ‘incompatible with your own belief’ (Adams 2006a, p.53). While Adams criticises ‘liberal’ approaches to dialogue which skew the outcomes with their drive for consensus, such ‘treasuring’ of disagreement skews the dialogue in the opposite direction. Moreover, even within these circumscribed limits, the results of SR seem to demonstrate not the separateness of the religious traditions but rather their difference in interrelation. Ochs speaks about how in studying the Torah and Qur’an together with a Muslim student and colleague, he ‘discovered that we were brethren and that our texts called one to the other’ (2005, p.5). The depth of common ground, interpenetration and mutual commentary between the Abrahamic faiths means that it simply cannot be regarded in postliberal fashion that the claims of one do not relate to the others. The question which demands an answer then is *how* do they relate to one another?

3. Religions make universal claims

The emphasis of Scriptural Reasoners on respecting and preserving each tradition in all its particularity, even, or perhaps especially, where truth-claims are conflicting suggests that they have not come to terms with the universality of the claims their traditions make. From a Christian perspective, Christ’s saving message is not only for Christians but also for the whole of humanity. Does love of neighbour not require that we should wish them to recognise the truth so that they can participate in the saving knowledge of Christ? In what sense can a ‘truth-seeking’ practice ‘treasure’ contradictory truth claims? There seems to be a kind of suspension of belief that occurs in SR meetings which practitioners do not attempt to resolve. The ‘tent of meeting’ is felt to be ‘a marginal and transitional sacred space where institutional

restraints are temporarily relaxed' (Kepnes 2006, p.27-28). For most Scriptural Reasoners however, it seems that once they return to their 'houses', these institutional restraints remain unchallenged. One might well ask, what is the point of the riches acquired in the tent if they must always be left behind?

What occurs within the tent is described, if at all, in eschatological terms and remains largely a mystery. Kepnes states that SR enables participants to 're-imagine' an end-time 'in which universal peace is won through preserving the particularity of the other instead of obliterating it'(2006, p.37). Ochs similarly speaks of his desire for an end-time where Judaism will be 'loved by Church and Mosque' (2005, p.5). He expresses the belief that in SR:

we taste such an end time for that moment of study. And I believe that it is only within that moment that we know how respond to the question, "Is there only one House?" without replaying the unhappy dialectic of the old millennium, in which we are forced to choose: either our House alone or the identity of all houses, either revealed truth or some universal humanity. (2005, p.9)

Ochs here suggests that we can gain an insight into how religious diversity should be regarded theologically, but only within the practice of SR. But how can what is known within a SR meeting, suddenly become unknown on leaving? Ochs seeks to avoid what he calls the either-or 'binarisms' regarding the truth or falsity of other religions (2006), but in doing so he also avoids explaining with any clarity what it is that is discovered about the other through the practice of SR. This is no minor issue, but has major implications for both the theoretical and the practical workings of each 'house', such as the nature of Christian mission for example. Scriptural Reasoners appear to have no tools with which they can make sense of their discovery of truth and

sacredness in other traditions and allow it to influence their house of worship, except to the extent of challenging ‘some of the exclusivist and triumphalist aspects’ of the traditions eschatologies (Kepnes 2006, p.37). They cannot help in understanding how religions relate to one another in the here and now. So, for example, despite Adams’s recognition of sacredness in other traditions and scriptures, he sees the generative aspect of SR as limited to yielding ‘further insights into the text and its possible range of uses to address practical problems’ (2006a, p.47). Hardy constitutes an exception to this case however. His concluding essay in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* sees the practice of SR as having a ‘very great’ impact ‘on the Abrahamic traditions’ themselves (2006, p.189). He rightly recognised that this impact will remain fragile and limited to those participating ‘unless *ways are found to identify, hold and transfer what is found, ways which promise to carry us further and not limit us from doing so*’ (2006, p.189 author’s emphasis). For this reason, Hardy advocated the use of academic reasoning (historical-critical, philosophical, theological) to evaluate and communicate the results of the text-centred SR meetings to a broader public (2006, p.188). The theological evaluation of what is learned from others is crucial if SR is indeed to be a truth-seeking venture. In marked contrast with Lindbeck’s vision Hardy states that in the process of SR, the discourse of the scriptures is:

established as primary discourse of God when we *find* how it leads us deeply into the infinity of the identity of the Divine, as this in turn enriches and integrates the traditions, and fructifies their interaction. (Hardy 2006, p.185 author’s emphasis)

Hardy’s call for enrichment and integration should not be perceived as a threat. It does not allow that religious traditions can be ‘preserved’ in all their particularity but neither does it entail the dissolution or dilution of identity as some Scriptural Reasoners seem to fear. Hardy was right to

recognise that, at least for most, the Scriptural Reasoner's study of their own scripture will continue to occupy 'a primary place in any attempt to understand' the scriptures of the other (Hardy 2006, p. 185), indicating that the seeking after an integrated, coherent religious outlook exists alongside a continued commitment to one's religious tradition. A movement in the direction proposed by Hardy offers the best hope for the future fecundity and coherence of SR.

Conclusion

The aims of SR to constitute truth-seeking and open-ended dialogue on the one hand and on the other to 'preserve' and 'treasure' the particularities of the traditions are found to be in tension, if not open conflict with one another. The root of this problem lies in SR's postliberal tendency to view religions as separate, closed and self-sustaining cultural-linguistic systems, a view which distorts both the historic and ongoing reality of traditions that have always been interconnected, and the traditional self understandings of the traditions concerned. Dialogue cannot be characterised as open-ended if limitations are placed around the possibilities of growth and mutual enrichment. Coherence requires that the recognition of sacredness outside one's own tradition is somehow integrated with one's prior religious convictions. In most cases this cannot be done without transformation, given that the traditional theological stances of Christianity and Islam either deny the validity of other scriptures or insist that their value can only be properly understood from within their tradition. This means that SR cannot 'preserve' the particular traditional theologies of the religions, while at the same time recognising the sacredness of other scriptures within the traditions which hold them dear. The laudable goals of SR will not be realised unless the historical legacies of these traditions are grappled with. These

legacies include exclusivism, supersessionism, rejection and denigration of each other's traditions and scriptures, as well as interaction, mutual fecundation and syncretism. Scriptural Reasoners must develop strategies for responding to the complex theological issues which this practice raises if they hope to feed their learning back into their communities and convince a broader public of the theological viability and value of this promising form of interreligious dialogue.

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